

**Testimony by Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky  
Chair, Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors**

**For the Little Hoover Commission  
Hearing on Foster Care  
November 21, 2002**

Thank you for inviting me to speak today about the child welfare system in Los Angeles County. I appreciate the Little Hoover Commission's work in convening this hearing. Hearings like this are important to assess our progress in improving the child welfare system and to discuss how Los Angeles County and the State can work together to better meet the needs of children and families. I will briefly address your questions regarding the efforts in Los Angeles County to reform the foster care system and the challenges we face. Marj Kelly also will be testifying today and she will provide additional details on these issues.

**1. Efforts in Los Angeles County to improve the child welfare system**

Although there are many initiatives, committees and strategies to improve the child welfare system in Los Angeles County, I want to discuss today two key efforts: (1) focus on permanent and safe homes for children, and (2) coordination of services and resources among County Departments, community agencies, courts and advocates.

- **Focus on permanent and safe homes for children** – Los Angeles County is striving to place children in foster care only when necessary and for the least amount of time possible. In order to accomplish this goal, child welfare services must be family-centered and community-based.
  - Family-centered services: Rather than relying solely on professionals to determine what a family needs, Los Angeles County is striving to become more family-centered. The Department of Children and Family Services is empowering families to work with social workers in identifying their needs and creating plans for meeting those needs. These efforts improve the lives of children in foster care by creating permanency plans that are individualized and customized, and utilize the strengths of each child and family. Family-centered services also ensure that children remain with relatives, if possible, when out-of-home placement is necessary.
  - Community-based services: We can minimize the trauma to children caused by removing them from their homes by maintaining attendance in the same schools, participation in the same churches, care from the same doctors, and placements with siblings. Community-based services are a critical element in providing safe, stable and permanent homes for children. Such services also should be available to families at-risk of entering the foster care system or whose cases have been closed from the foster care system.

Los Angeles County is working toward a more community-based system. The keys to serious commitment to a community-based system are: (1) geographic caseloads that help social workers become familiar with the broad array of grassroots and community-based organizations that care about families; (2) building the capacity of community-based services to assure that quality services are available in every geographic community throughout Los Angeles County; and (3) cross-training to help social workers, community-based service providers, families and community members learn to understand and work well together.

- **Coordination among the County Departments, the juvenile court, service providers, and advocates:** The child welfare department alone cannot ensure the health and safety of children. The County is much more successful in protecting children when our Departments, communities and courts share resources and expertise. We are fortunate in Los Angeles County to have strong leadership in the Juvenile Court with Judge Michael Nash. The Departments of Children and Family Services, Mental Health, Probation and Health Services work closely with the Juvenile Court to improve the foster care system.

Los Angeles County also benefits from a pro-active Commission for Children and Families (Commission), which monitors the effectiveness of children's services and makes recommendations to the Board of Supervisors on how to improve the programs, services and policies affecting children. The Commission reviews policies, procedures and systemic issues, monitors and evaluates programs, and assesses the quality of services of the County departments serving children. Most significantly, the Commissioners roll up their sleeves and work with the Departments and communities to improve the lives of children and families.

The County Board of Supervisors created the Service Integration Branch within our Chief Administrative Office to help County departments integrate service delivery systems, to support and coordinate collaborative policy development, and to implement activities for improving the lives of children and families.

One of the County's Strategic Goals is to: Improve the well-being of children and families in Los Angeles County as measured by achievements in the five outcomes areas adopted by the Board of Supervisors: Good Health, Safety and Survival, Economic Well-being, Emotional and Social Well-Being, and Education and Workforce readiness. To achieve this goal, the County set forth several strategies, including: (1) Develop and implement a Service Integration Action Plan which focuses on making the County's service delivery system more family-focused, culturally competent, accessible, and accountable for outcomes for children and families; and (2) Measure progress towards improving the five outcomes by establishing a standard set of Countywide indicators and creating the Children's Budget.

## 2. How the State can improve the ability of county-run foster care systems to respond to the needs of children and families.

- **Improve policies and support for relative caregivers:** The largest number of caretakers for dependent children are relatives. However, the State has not created policies or funded programs to assist relative caregivers outside of the child welfare system. Although KinGAP is a step in the right direction, families need more than just financial assistance payments, they need support and resources. Relative caregivers need assistance with housing, child-care, respite care, support groups, educational assistance and other supportive services. We must ensure that relatives receive the support they need to appropriately care for and nurture children.

The State should work with the counties to convince the federal government of the need to fund community-based services for relative caregivers and to create a system for relative caregivers outside of child welfare. Although the State provided some funding for kinship centers, it was not nearly enough to develop comprehensive kinship support centers throughout Los Angeles County.

- **Flexibility in funding:** Rather than funding more pilot programs or demonstration projects, the State should help us make effective programs available to all families -- integrated into the way that social workers provide services. The State and County also should work with the federal government to create more flexible funding streams or additional waivers to expand and support family-centered programs, individualized and customized services to children and families, and prevention and early intervention services.
- **The State should work strategically with Los Angeles County.** Los Angeles County has 40% of the State's foster care caseload and yet the State does not have a strategy for working with large, urban counties, and particularly Los Angeles County. The needs and strengths in Los Angeles County are often very different than the smaller counties.
- **Decrease the yardstick for social workers** and provide additional funding to support decreased caseloads. The current caseload makes it extremely difficult for social workers to provide adequate supervision or individualized services to families.
- **Provide additional funding for child welfare research** in partnership with universities in order to establish more research-based methods and policies. Although the State has established an on-going partnership with University of California Berkeley that produces helpful information, we need better partnerships with local universities in order to track and monitor local practices.

**3. How policy-makers and the public can monitor the pace and effectiveness of reforms.** Los Angeles County is striving to distribute more accurate data to allow the Departments, public and stakeholders to assess outcomes for children. The Department of Children and Family Services is working to improve its data collection system by centralizing the function within its Information and Technology Bureau. This Bureau will produce data that is accurate, easy to understand and readily accessible.

Los Angeles County also created a Children's Budget as an addendum to the County's Proposed Budget, which establishes a countywide inventory of children and family programs. The Children's Budget will provide the Board of Supervisors, County departments, and the community with a better understanding of how well services are being provided, what are the results of the services, and what are the collective multi-agency contributions being made toward improving the County's outcomes for children.

**4. What should the public's expectations for foster care be and how should the Little Hoover Commission and other stakeholders define success in reforming foster care.** Success in reforming foster care can be measured by the number of children in safe and permanent homes and the amount of time that children stay in foster care. In addition, the public and stakeholders should monitor the overall well-being of children and give more attention to health, education and the social and emotional well-being of the children in our care. These goals are critical to ensure that the children who depend on the Los Angeles County foster care system will be prepared for a successful future.

**5. What should be the role of the Little Hoover Commission in promoting increased attention to the needs of children and families served by the foster care system.**

- Hold both public and private agencies accountable for achieving results for children.
- Help the public to understand the difficulties and complexities faced by social workers and child welfare agencies –and what they can do to help.
- Continue to advocate for the implementation of the Little Hoover Commission recommendations.
- Help counties receive the necessary assistance from the state and federal governments to implement the reforms.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak today and for the Commission's efforts to improve the child welfare system. I am confident that Los Angeles County is moving in the right direction to improve the lives of vulnerable children. I appreciate the Commission's continual monitoring, encouraging and pushing us to do better. I look forward to another outstanding report and recommendations from the Commission.